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Of the Election of Grace

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The word "election" as used in Scripture is synonymous with the word "choosing." It refers to God's own choosing or electing certain individuals from eternity to be His believing children—and to do so in accord with three contributing factors: by His own grace, for Christ's sake, through the means of grace.

The doctrine of election safeguards the precious truth that we are saved by grace alone. It is not a doctrine known among Christians as well as it should be, although our Lord and His apostles taught it plainly and clearly. True, it is not the kind of doctrine that one teaches to the world or to newcomers in the faith. Nevertheless, it should be taught to Christians for their comfort, especially in times of spiritual trials. There are aspects of the doctrine of election that supersede our sin-corrupted reason, but the same is true for all Christian doctrines. Christian doctrines are theological; they are God's logic, if you will, to which our human reason must bow in believing acceptance.

The following Bible passages teach everything God would have us know about the election of grace. There are a few other passages that take this doctrine for granted, as, for example, all those passages that speak about the "elect." But for the purpose of this essay we shall focus on these election passages.

Ephesians 1:3-7	2 Timothy 1:9
2 Thessalonians 2:13-15	Matthew 24:22-24
Acts 13:48	John 10:27-29
Romans 8:28-30	

We shall, first of all, consider more extensively the content of these passages. Then we shall review our confession of this doctrine as it is expressed in the *Brief Statement* of 1932, paragraphs 35-40.

Ephesians 1:3-7

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ, just as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before Him in love, having predestined us to adoption as sons by Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the good pleasure of His will, to the praise of the glory of His grace, by which He has made us accepted in the Beloved. In Him we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins, according to the riches of His grace.

Verse 3: Following his customary introduction in verses 1-2, Paul begins his letter in this way, when as a prisoner in Rome he wrote to the Christians at Ephesus, among whom he had labored for nearly three years on his third missionary journey. He praises God because He had blessed both Paul and the Ephesians with all kinds of heavenly and spiritual blessings through Christ Jesus.

What are these blessings? Of great significance is the one mentioned in verse 7: "**In Him [Christ] we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins."** This wonderful blessing is indeed heavenly because it opens wide the gates of heaven and ushers us directly into the presence of God. Our sins are all forgiven in Christ; out of this blessing flow all the other spiritual blessings that we know and possess. This blessing has come to us because Christ died on the cross for all sins, and also because the benefits of Christ's death have been given to us in our Baptism, through the Gospel Word, through absolution, and through the Lord's Supper. Our whole life, therefore, should be a constant song of thanksgiving to the God who has loved us and given us both His Son into death for us and His Spirit to bring us the forgiveness of sins that we have in Christ.

These blessings are truly ours too, though we have lived centuries after these words were first written and addressed to the Ephesians. For did not Christ die also for us, in that He died for all? Is not the Holy Spirit proclaiming the good news of forgiveness also to us? What Paul wrote to the Ephesians long ago is equally true, equally in place for all believers wherever and whenever they have lived. Therefore we, like the Ephesian believers, join Paul in praising our God.

Verse 4: In this verse Paul states that these blessings we have now in time were ours already in Christ from eternity, that is, "before the foundation of the world." Paul informs all Christians, who now enjoy the blessings of forgiveness in Christ, that God already chose or elected **us**, selected **us**, picked **us** out before we were born, before the world began. God chose us through the Gospel, with the saving work of Christ in mind, and on that basis made us His children, for we are the children of God by faith in Christ Jesus. And why He did this is made clear in the next verse. It was because of His gracious will. Nothing in us moved Him to choose us; before God we all alike are guilty. It was His good pleasure to choose us, so that His glorious grace, His rich grace, might be praised forever.

Therefore the fact that we are now Christians is due solely to the grace of God in Christ Jesus that He had in mind for you and me from the beginning, from eternity, when He chose us and predestined us. That which He planned from eternity for you and me He has carried out in the course of time when He baptized us and brought us to faith in Christ. On these truths enacted upon us and made known to us we rest our confidence and sing our praises:

But God beheld my wretched state Before the world's foundation,
And, mindful of His mercies great, He planned my soul's salvation (TLH 387:4).

Lord, 'tis not that I did choose Thee; That, I know, could never be;
For this heart would still refuse Thee Had Thy grace not chosen me (TLH 37:1).

O Love, who ere life's earliest dawn On me Thy choice hast gently laid; . . .O Love, I give myself . . . only Thine, to be (TLH 397:2).

From eternity, O God, In Thy Son Thou didst elect me; Therefore, Father, on life's road Graciously to heav'n direct me (TLH 411:1).

Likewise we agree with Stoeckhardt in his commentary on Ephesians in which these words come from his excursus on election:

> When [the Christian] hears of the eternal election and selection, which according to its very nature and conception is a particular election, he may ask himself: Now, how about myself? Do I belong

to these elect? . . . [The apostle] here designates the Christians as the elect of God. If, therefore, anyone can truly say: "I am a Christian," then he is also to be sure and to believe: "I am one of the elect". . . .

Accordingly, every Christian may say and should conclude: True, I am a poor sinner, unworthy of God's grace, but I believe in Jesus Christ, who has redeemed me by His precious blood, in whom I have grace and forgiveness of my sins; through Christ I am a child of God. Even though it be in great weakness, I am following after sanctification, I am making an honest effort to walk worthy of the Lord unto all pleasing. Therefore I belong to the elect, for these are the very marks by which the elect are recognized. The entire present number of Christians are the result of God's choice and counsel, the consequence and the effect of His election. . . . I have a perfect right, therefore, on the basis of the effect to draw my conclusions concerning the cause. (94-5 emph. added)

2 Thessalonians 2:13-15

But we are bound to give thanks to God always for you, brethren beloved by the Lord, because God from the beginning chose you for salvation through sanctification by the Spirit and belief in the truth, to which He called you by our gospel, for the obtaining of the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore, brethren, stand fast and hold the traditions which you were taught, whether by word or our epistle.

Again we see that the doctrine of the election of grace gives a reason to rejoice and thank God. Paul mentions two acts of God that prompt such thankful joy: 1) God chose believers from the beginning; 2) God called you (the believers) by "our gospel." As in his letter to the Ephesians, Paul traces the blessings that all Christians enjoy in time on this earth back to eternity when God chose them all for salvation.

Verse 13 (God at work in eternity): Paul states as a matter of fact, for which he gives thanks, that God chose the Thessalonian Christians. *When* did He choose them? "From the beginning," we are told. *For what purpose* were they chosen? It was "for salvation," Paul says—and not as a reality only true for the believers in Thessalonica. It was true for the Thessalonians because it was true for all believers. In other words, God chose you (the individual believer) to save you; God chose you and me to be saved. *How* did God plan to carry out this choosing? "Through sanctification of the Spirit and belief in the truth." Thus God chose the very *means* by which He would save all those whom He has chosen. That same means would be the Holy Spirit's proclamation of Jesus Christ to make you holy, to set you apart for God, with the result that you have faith in Jesus Christ, "belief in the truth." To be noted here is the fact that our faith in Jesus Christ ***is*** the product, the ***result*** of the Holy Spirit's work.

Thus when God chose us from the beginning to be saved, He chose to save us in this way only: through faith in the Holy Spirit's message of truth. Therefore if someone despises the Holy Spirit's words and refuses to believe and follow the truth, he cannot comfort himself with God's eternal election. Only in the means of grace (the Gospel in Word and Sacraments) is God's choosing brought to pass for each and every believer.

Verse 14 (God at work in time): Apostle Paul has said to the Thessalonians: God chose you from eternity to be saved through the means of grace. On that basis, then, God now in time has "called you by our gospel," the good news of Jesus Christ proclaimed by Paul and Silas and Timothy. God came to them with His Gospel and converted each of them by its power, even as He planned from eternity, so that they all might obtain and possess "the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ."

Paul has personalized the doctrine of election for the Thessalonians on the certain ground that what God did for them, He has done for all who believe in Christ as their Savior. We too have been called by the Gospel of Christ. Therefore also we have been chosen by God from eternity to be saved through the means of grace. We dare not despise these means, but rather do with confidence and diligence what Paul states in verse 15: **"**Therefore, brethren, stand fast and hold the traditions which you were taught, whether by word or our epistle."

What about someone who insists that God has chosen him, but still he continues in sin? Dr.

Walther writes in his *Law and Gospel*:

> Suppose some one were to come to you and acknowledge that he has treated you shamefully. But he wants to continue treating you that way; and yet he desires that you forgive him. Would you do it? Of course not. We would consider a person insane who would talk like this: "I want to be forgiven, but I want to continue doing for what I am asking for forgiveness. As often as I meet you, I shall insult you; but I want you to forgive me." Now, that is just the way God is treated by men who want to take comfort in His mercy while continuing in sin. (219-20)

Again Walther writes of "a warning to us not to reason ourselves into a state of security on the ground that we simply shall have to go to heaven because we are predestinated. The major of the syllogism is true: Whoever is predestinated will certainly go to heaven. But there is no evidence for the minor, *viz.*, whether the party indulging in the above reasoning is predestinated. If a person lives in sin and continues that kind of life, this is a sign that he is not predestinated" (221).

Acts 13:48

> **Now when the Gentiles heard this** [that the Gospel of Christ was for all]**, they were glad and glorified the word of the Lord. And as many as had been appointed** [ordained, marked out, destined] **to eternal life believed.**

This is part of the account of Paul's first missionary journey. When Paul came to Antioch in Pisidia, he preached the Gospel in the Jewish synagogue. The Jews in general rejected his message, but some of the Gentiles believed it. Which Gentile persons believed what Paul had said? Those who were "appointed to eternal life," that is, those that had been chosen by God in Christ before the world began.

Therefore the cause of their coming to faith was not their own decision for Christ, but God's election or choosing of them in Christ before the world began. On that basis we confess in the *Formula of Concord* (a Lutheran confession of 1577): "The eternal election of God, however, not only foresees and foreknows the salvation of the elect, but is also, from the gracious will and pleasure of God in Christ Jesus, a cause which procures, works, helps, and promotes our salvation and what pertains thereto" (*Trig.* 1065 emph. added).

WHY do I believe in Jesus Christ? Not because I wanted to believe (though I do want to believe now), for how could I, one who was *dead* in trespasses and sins, want to believe in Jesus Christ? It is only because God chose me from eternity and planned how to bring me to faith in Christ through the means of grace and thus is preserving me in this faith to the end. Yes, I began to believe and continue to believe because God carried out this plan. My faith is not the cause of God's choosing me, but God's choosing of me is the cause of my faith.

Now what about those who rejected Paul's message? Why did they reject it? Paul's words to the Jews in Acts 13:46 provide an answer: **"It was necessary that the word of God should be spoken to you first; but since you reject it, and judge yourselves unworthy of everlasting life, behold, we turn to the Gentiles."** Notice that Paul did not tie their rejection of the Gospel to any supposed lack of desire on God's part to save them or to some failure of His to elect them. Their rejection is the result of their own doing, and it amounts to them judging themselves to be unworthy of God's gift of life. Scripture never speaks of any kind of double election, and neither should we. To do so would deny both the universality of God's grace and the universality of Christ's sacrifice.

Romans 8:28-30

> **And we know that all things work together for good** [some manuscripts read: "God works all things together for good"] **to those who love God, to those who are the called according to His purpose. For whom He foreknew, He also predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son, that He** [Jesus] **might be the firstborn among many brethren. Moreover whom He predestined, these He also called; whom He called, these He also justified; and whom He justified, these He also glorified.**

Verse 28: This passage is rich in comfort, for here God says that no matter what He permits to happen in this world, it all fits into a pattern for good as far as His called believers are concerned. If you

are a Christian, then you have the assurance from God Himself that all the troubles you encounter in this life—loss of employment, loss of friendship, loss of goods, ridicule of men, sickness, etc.—actually happen for your eternal benefit. Though we cannot see it come to pass necessarily, we have God's Word on it.

"All things work together for good to them who are the called." But who are "the called"? The called ones are those whom the Holy Spirit has called by the Gospel, those whom God has brought into His invisible Church through Baptism and the preaching of the Gospel. The called ones, therefore, are the believers. We too are God's called ones; we too have the assurance that all things are working out for our eternal good.

Paul says they are **"**the called according to His purpose." This means that those whom God has called He has called according to His gracious plan from eternity. That plan outlined in Romans 8:29-30 has five grand steps, of which God's calling is the third.

God's gracious plan is this:

1) God foreknew certain ones; He chose them in love from eternity. The word translated "foreknew" does not mean simply that He knew about them beforehand. If that were true, then God would be speaking here about all people when Paul says "those whom God foreknew." God certainly knew all men beforehand. Remember, the word here as in other places in the Scriptures (Rom. 11:2: "God has not cast away His people whom He foreknew") means that God chose some beforehand in love to be His own; He foreordained them to be His children before they were born. Luther's Bible has "*welche er zuvor versehen hat."* The *Formula of Concord* has: "*in Gnaden gedacht,"* which means "in grace He considered" (*Trig*. 1068).
2) These foreknown ones God predestined to be members of His family, adopted sons and daughters in His household, that His only-begotten Son, Jesus Christ, might be the Older Brother in a large family of children.
3) These predestined ones God called in the course of time through His Gospel.
4) These called ones God justified. He wiped out their guilt. He said to each one of them: Your sins be forgiven.
5) These justified ones God glorified. Their glory *already established* (past tense "glorified") is now hidden on earth, but it shall be revealed on the Last Day and they shall have it forever.

God's five steps proceed *from eternity, in/during time, to eternity*.

Thus every Christian, who has been called by God's Gospel, should have the assurance that God's calling of him was the third step in God's gracious plan. His calling was preceded by two steps in eternity: God's foreknowing of him in love and God's predestination of him to sonship. His calling is succeeded by two steps: God's justification of him and his final glorification.

If anyone doubts that he has been called, the Gospel is still here in its gracious power, declaring that God **"**did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him up for us all" (Rom. 8:32). **"**For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life" (John 3:16). This invitation is there for everyone, and it is a powerful appeal that is able to convert and enlighten the spiritually blind and dead and **"to uphold and sustain the weak and fearful."** Those who believe this Gospel that God in love sent His Son to die for the whole world will also believe the good news that their very faith in Christ is the result of God's gracious choosing of them in eternity and that it thus rests on a solid and unshakable foundation. The Christian is able, therefore, to say with Paul: **"**I am persuaded that neither death nor life, nor angels nor principalities nor powers, nor things present nor things to come, nor height nor depth, nor any other created thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Rom. 8:38-39). This is the Christian's certain hope, deriving its certainty not from inner convictions or feelings, but from God's sure promise and His effective working based on that promise.

2 Timothy 1:9

> [God] **has saved us and called us with a holy calling, not according to our works, but according to His own purpose and grace which was given to us in Christ Jesus before time**

began.

What moved God to save and call us? Not our good works, for we had none good enough. It was "His own purpose and grace," His gracious plan from eternity. God's election of His Christians is truly an **"**election of grace" (Rom. 11:5), a gift "given to us Christ Jesus before time began." Nothing in us moved Him to choose us or call us.

Matthew 24:22-24

> **"And unless those days were shortened, no flesh would be saved; but for the elect's sake those days will be shortened. Then if anyone says to you, 'Look, here is the Christ!' or 'There!' do not believe it. For false christs and false prophets will rise and show great signs and wonders to deceive, if possible, even the elect."**

In these verses from the Lord's prophecy of difficult days ahead, Jesus states two things in regard to our election:

1) For the elect's sake those days will be shortened;

2) The great signs and wonders of false prophets will not succeed in deceiving the elect of God.

Just as Paul taught in Romans 8:28-30 that the called of God were chosen from eternity and will be glorified to eternity, so Jesus teaches here that the elect of God will most surely be preserved to the end. Even the most difficult circumstances will not overwhelm them or deceive them into unbelief. So earnestly and certainly does God preserve His chosen sheep that He even shortens the difficult days on their behalf and protects them from the powerful deceit of false teachings.

John 10:27-29

> **"My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me. And I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; neither shall anyone snatch them out of My hand. My Father, who has given them to Me, is greater than all; and no one is able to snatch them out of My Father's hand."**

Let us put our trust in these promises of our Savior. To summarize, as the following tract does: "Election is

1. God's decree in eternity
2. whereby He chose, predestinated, or elected
3. in His Son, Jesus Christ,
4. certain individuals out of the world of sinners
5. and determined to bring them by means of His Word and Sacraments
6. without fail to faith and salvation" ("Chosen by Grace" 3).

Since the title of the tract is "Chosen by ***Grace*** from Eternity," the above summary could be improved by adding the word "grace" or "gracious," for the Scripture surely emphasizes that election is by grace and by grace alone.

In spite of the Holy Spirit's clear teaching of this doctrine in Scripture and the clear confession of this teaching in the Lutheran Confessions, many Lutheran teachers, including many generally considered to be orthodox, have failed to explain this doctrine adequately without introducing questionable, misleading, and even outright unscriptural speculation. In the Editor's Preface to Gerhard's *Commonplace on Election* Benjamin Mayes explains the problem this way:

> FC SD XI 4 states clearly that God's eternal choice (election) is a cause of faith in individual believers. Yet soon after the *Formula of Concord* was published, Lutherans departed from this position and began to teach that God's election is based in some way on the faith of individual believers, which He foresees. Even one of the authors of the *Formula of Concord*, Jacob Andreae, asserted in a 1586 colloquy with Theodore Beza that foreseen faith can be called a cause of God's election. . . . But rather than remaining with a doctrine in tension with itself, as FC SD XI sets forth, the Lutheran Orthodox went further and strove to find logically consistent answers to many questions that the Reformation era had preferred to leave unanswered. (Gerhard xiii-xiv)

Johann Gerhard himself stated the doctrine in a misleading way when he wrote: "He elected or predestined to eternal life those whom, with His infallible knowledge, He foreknew from eternity would persevere in believing in Christ by the grace of the Holy Spirit through hearing the Gospel" (Gerhard 142-143). This certainly seems to state that foreseen faith is the cause of God's election, rather than that God's election is a cause of faith, as taught by Acts 13:48. Gerhard's presentation also appears to be based on a faulty sense of the word "foreknew" in Romans 8:28-30.

The inconsistency between the presentation of the Lutheran dogmaticians and the confession of the *Formula of Concord* did not become obvious to many until the *Gnadenwahlstreit* (controversy on the doctrine of election) erupted in the Synodical Conference in the latter years of the nineteenth century. When C. F. W. Walther presented the doctrine as confessed in the *Formula of Concord*, he was opposed by Lutheran leaders who taught election in view of man's faith, that is, that God foresaw those who would accept the Gospel of Christ and on the basis of this foreseen faith chose them as His own. In the view of Walther his opponents were thereby denying *sola gratia* and explaining God's election in synergistic language, that is, that man himself was given some credit for his own salvation.

Walther's scriptural presentation was ably supported by other Synodical Conference theologians, such as Adolf Hoenecke, Ulrik Koren, and George Stoeckhardt. Stoeckhardt especially made a thorough exegetical study of the passages dealing with this doctrine.

The controversy on election continued for many years, with the Missouri and Wisconsin Synods united in agreement with Walther, whereas the Iowa and Ohio Synods continued to oppose Walther's teaching. We present here a few of the statements made by Walther's opponents in the course of the controversy.

Dr. Fritschel of the Iowa Synod said: "God will have all men to be saved, yet not unconditionally, but in the order of faith. Now, since He knows from eternity how many there are that, within this order, let themselves be saved, the universal will to save all believers becomes the will to save just this certain number" (qtd in Buenger 83).

The Norwegian Articles of Agreement, adopted in 1912 in Madison, Wisconsin, and thus known as the "Madison Agreement," gave approval to this way of presenting the doctrine of election: 'God has ordained to eternal life all those who from eternity He foresaw would accept the proffered grace, believe in Christ, and remain steadfast in this faith unto the end' (qtd. in Pieper *Conversion* 8).

Since conflicting statements concerning the doctrine of election continued to be made in subsequent years, the Missouri Synod felt it necessary to state its confession concerning election clearly, adopting the *Brief Statement* of 1932 with its not-so-brief section on election. As members of the Church of the Lutheran Confession we have also accepted the *Brief Statement* as our confession. Printed here, then, is the section on election, paragraphs 35-40, which has the title "Of the Election of Grace" (words underlined below indicate original emphasis):

35. By election of grace we mean this truth, that all those who by the grace of God alone, for Christ's sake, through the means of grace, are brought to faith, are justified, sanctified, and preserved in faith <u>here in time</u>, that all these have already from eternity been endowed by God with faith, justification, sanctification, and preservation in faith, and this <u>for the same reason</u>, namely, by grace alone, for Christ's sake, and by way of the means of grace. That this is the doctrine of Holy Scripture is evident from Eph. 1:3-7; 2 Thess. 2:13, 14; Acts 13:48; Rom. 8:28-30; 2 Tim. 1:9; Matt. 24:22-24 (cp. Form. of Conc. Triglot, p. 1065. . .).

36. Accordingly we reject as an anti-Scriptural error the doctrine that not alone the grace of God and the merit of Christ are the cause of the election of grace, but that God has, in addition, found or regarded something good <u>in us</u> which prompted or caused Him to elect us, this being variously designated as "good works," "right conduct," "proper self-determination," "refraining from willful resistance," etc. Nor does Holy Scripture know of an election "by foreseen faith," "in view of faith," as though the faith of the elect were to be placed before their election; but according to Scripture the faith which the elect have in time belongs to the spiritual blessings with which God has endowed them by His eternal election. For Scripture teaches, Acts 13:48: "And as many as were ordained

unto eternal life believed." Our Lutheran Confession also testifies (Triglot, p. 1065. . .): "The eternal election of God, however, not only foresees and foreknows the salvation of the elect, but is also, from the gracious will and pleasure of God in Christ Jesus, a cause which procures, works, helps, and promotes our salvation and what pertains thereto; and upon this our salvation is so founded that the gates of hell cannot prevail against it, Matt. 16:18, as is written John 10:28: 'Neither shall any man pluck My sheep out of My hand'; and again, Acts 13:48: 'And as many as were ordained to eternal life believed.'"

37. But as earnestly as we maintain that there is an election of grace, or a predestination to salvation, so decidedly do we teach, on the other hand, that there is no election of wrath, or predestination to damnation. Scripture plainly reveals the truth that the love of God for the world of lost sinners is universal, that is, that it embraces all men without exception, that Christ has fully reconciled all men unto God, and that God earnestly desires to bring all men to faith, to preserve them therein, and thus to save them, as Scripture testifies, 1 Tim. 2:4: ***"God will have all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth."*** *No man is lost because God has predestinated him to eternal damnation.— Eternal election is a cause why the elect are brought to faith in time, Acts 13:48; but election is not a cause why men remain unbelievers when they hear the Word of God. The reason assigned by Scripture for this sad fact is that these men judge themselves unworthy of everlasting life, putting the Word of God from them and obstinately resisting the Holy Ghost, whose earnest will it is to bring also them to repentance and faith by means of the Word, Acts 13:46; 7:51; Matt. 23:37.*

[Of these last three references no words are quoted in the *Brief Statement*; so we provide them below—statements by Paul, Stephen, and Jesus in the King James Version:

"It was necessary that the word of God should first have been spoken to you: but seeing ye put it from you, and judge yourselves unworthy of everlasting life, lo, we turn to the Gentiles."

"Ye stiffnecked and uncircumcised in heart and ears, ye do always resist the Holy Ghost: as your fathers did, so do ye."

"O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, thou that killest the prophets, and stonest them which are sent unto thee, how often would I have gathered thy children together, even as a hen gathereth her chickens under her wings, and ye would not!"*]*

The *Brief Statement* concerning Election of Grace continues, with Scripture quotations added in brackets whenever the *Brief Statement* simply has a reference:

38. To be sure, it is necessary to observe the Scriptural distinction between the election of grace and the universal will of grace. This universal gracious will of God embraces all men; the election of grace, however, does not embrace all, but only a definite number, whom **"***God hath from the beginning chosen to salvation," 2 Thess. 2:13, the "remnant," the "seed" which "the Lord left, Rom. 9:27-29, the "election," Rom. 11:7; and while the universal will of grace is frustrated in the case of most men, Matt. 22:14* [**"**For many are called, but few are chosen."]; *Luke 7:30* [**"But the Pharisees and lawyers rejected the will of God for themselves, not having been baptized of him"**]**,** *the election of grace attains its end with all whom it embraces, Rom. 8:28-30. Scripture, however, while distinguishing between the universal will of grace and the election of grace, does not place the two in opposition to each other. On the contrary, it teaches that the grace dealing with those who are lost is altogether earnest and fully efficacious for conversion. Blind reason indeed declares these two truths to be contradictory; but we impose silence on our reason. The seeming disharmony will disappear in the light of heaven, 1 Cor. 13:12* [**"For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part, but then I shall know just as I also am known"].**

39. Furthermore, by election of grace, Scripture does not mean that one part of God's counsel of salvation according to which He will receive into heaven those who persevere in faith unto the end, but, on the contrary, Scripture means this, that God, before the foundation of the world, from pure grace, because of the redemption of Christ, has chosen for His own a definite number of persons out of the corrupt mass and has determined to bring them, through Word and Sacrament, to faith and salvation.

40. Christians can and should be assured of their eternal election. This is evident from the fact that Scripture addresses them as the chosen ones and comforts them with their election, Eph. 1:4; 2 Thess. 2:13. This assurance of one's personal election, however, springs only from faith in the Gospel, from the assurance that God so loved the world that He gave His only-begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life. For God sent not His Son into the world to condemn the world; on the contrary, through the life, suffering, and death of His Son He fully reconciled the whole world of sinners unto Himself. Faith in this truth leaves no room for the fear that God might still harbor thoughts of wrath and damnation concerning us. Scripture inculcates that in Rom. 8:32, 33: ***"He that spared not His own Son, but delivered Him up for us all, how shall He not with Him also freely give us all things? Who shall lay anything to the charge of God's elect? It is God that justifieth."*** *Luther's pastoral advice is therefore in accord with Scripture: "Gaze upon the wounds of Christ and the blood shed for you; there predestination will shine forth" . . . . That the Christian obtains the personal assurance of his eternal election in this way is taught also by our Lutheran Confessions (Formula of Concord. Triglot, p. 1071. . .): "Of this we should not judge according to our reason nor according to the Law or from any external appearance. Neither should we attempt to investigate the secret, concealed abyss of divine predestination, but should give heed to the revealed will of God. For He has made known unto us the mystery of His will and made it manifest through Christ that it might be preached, Eph. 1:9ff.; 2 Tim. 1:9f."— In order to insure the proper method of viewing eternal election and the Christian's assurance of it, the Lutheran Confessions set forth at length the principle that election is not to be considered "in a bare manner. . . , as though God only held a muster, thus: 'This one shall be saved, that one shall be damned'" (Formula of Concord. Triglot, p. 1065. . .); but "the Scriptures teach this doctrine in no other way that to direct us thereby to the Word, Eph. 1:13* [with v. 14: **"**In Him you also trusted, after that you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation; in whom also, having believed, you were sealed with the Holy Spirit of promise, who is the guarantee of our inheritance. . ."]; *1 Cor. 1:7* [with v. 8: "**. . . our Lord Jesus Christ, who will also confirm you to the end, that you may be blameless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ"];** *exhort to repentance, 2 Tim. 3:16* [**"**All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness"]; *urge to godliness, . . . John 15:3* [**"**You are already clean because of the word which I have spoken to you"]; *strengthen faith and assure us of our salvation, Eph. 1:13; John 10:27f.; 2 Thess. 2:13f" . . . . —*

To sum up, just as God in time draws the Christians unto Himself through the Gospel, so He has already in His eternal election endowed them with ***"sanctification of the Spirit and belief of the truth,"*** *2 Thess. 2:13. Therefore: If, by the grace of God, you believe in the Gospel of the forgiveness of your sins for Christ's sake, you are to be certain that you also belong to the number of God's elect, even as Scripture, 2 Thess. 2:13, addresses the believing Thessalonians as the chosen of God and gives thanks to God for their election.*

Although the predestination controversy divided the Synodical Conference, we can be thankful that God used the controversy to clarify and to reemphasize the precious doctrine of God's gracious election, as demonstrated by the above section from the *Brief Statement*. One of the special blessings granted to confessional Lutherans of our day is that Martin Luther and the authors of the *Formula of Concord*, as well as Synodical Lutheran theologians such as Walther, Hoenecke, Koren, and Stoeckhardt, were enabled by God to put into practice the words of the apostle Paul in 2 Corinthians 10:4-5: **"For the weapons of our warfare are not carnal but mighty in God for pulling down strongholds, casting down arguments and every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God, bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ."** Man's reason, including the reason of Christians, has difficulty with this doctrine because it tends to draw what it deems to be "reasonable" conclusions that are contrary to the clear Word of God.

Since Martin Luther at various times in his life was severely troubled by his own thoughts concerning predestination, he was able to give helpful counsel to other Christians tempted by Satan with

all kinds of doubts and despairing thoughts in connection with this doctrine. We conclude our study, therefore, with some of Luther's comments on 1 Peter 1:2, which has these words: **"elect according to the foreknowledge of God the Father"**:

> From this we should learn that predestination does not rest upon our worthiness and merit, as the sophists hold, for then Satan could every moment make it doubtful and overthrow it; but it rests in the hand of God and is founded upon His mercy, which is unwavering and eternal; for that reason it is called the foreknowledge of God and hence is certain and infallible. Therefore, when your sins and unworthiness trouble you and the thought comes to you that you might not be elected of God, also that the number of the elect is small and the company of the godless large, and you are terrified by the awful examples of divine wrath and judgment, then do not dispute long why God does this or that so, and not differently, when he could easily do so. Do not presume to explore the depths of divine foreknowledge with your reason, else you will certainly go astray and either sink into gloomy fatalism or turn epicurean. But hold firmly to the promises of the Gospel which teach you that Christ, the Son of God, became incarnate to bless all people on earth, that is, to redeem them from sin and death, justify and save them; and that He did this according to the command and gracious will of God, our heavenly Father, who so loved the world that He gave His only-begotten Son that whosoever believeth on Him should not perish, but have eternal life, John 3:16. If you follow this counsel, namely, first of all acknowledge that you are by nature a child of wrath, worthy of eternal death and damnation, from which no creature, human or angelic, can save you, and then grasp the promise of God and believe that He is the merciful, truthful God, who from pure grace, without our work and merit, faithfully keeps what He has promised, and has sent Christ, His only Son, in order that He make satisfaction for your sins and give you His innocence and righteousness, finally to redeem you from all evil and from death; then do not doubt that you belong to the company of the elect. If we consider election in this manner, even as Paul does, it is comforting beyond measure. If we proceed in a different manner, the thought of election will be terrifying. (qtd. in Pieper *Dogmatics* 483-4)

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The Lutheran and Reformed Understandings of the Communication of Attributes: The Differences and their Attendant Relevance

Michael Roehl

Introduction

It is necessary, of course, to approach every doctrinal study with a humble reverence for the whole counsel of God's Word. It is especially important here if we are to avoid the two extremes of apathy and arrogance. The temptation for one might be a general sense of indifference; for the other a prideful preoccupation with our own perceived erudition. Neither is appropriate for a study of this or of any other doctrine of God's Word. That such a study will prove both necessary and fruitful will, we pray, become readily apparent. We also pray that such a study will humble us as we are forced to confront the obvious limitations of our puny human knowledge and intellect, and also as we behold the superiority and omniscience of our Creator and Savior God.

With this warning we prepare our hearts to study God's revealed wisdom concerning not just the communication of attributes in the God-man, Jesus Christ, but how the differences between the Lutheran and Reformed understandings of this doctrine profoundly impact several of the most basic elements of the Christian faith.

Questions to establish as the need for this study

That a review of this subject is both good and necessary can be established by testing our own understanding with a number of questions:

- Does Scripture teach us to speak of a union or a unity of the two natures of Christ?
- How do we rightly define or understand "hypostatic" when we speak of the "hypostatic union"?[1]
- How does the "communication of natures" differ from the "communication of attributes"?
- Do Lutherans agree with Roman Catholics in their teaching on the communication of attributes?
- How does a correct understanding of the communication of attributes affect our understanding of Holy Communion and the real presence?
- How did Calvin and Zwingli agree or differ on their understanding of the communication of attributes and how did that difference affect their teaching on the real presence?

Many other questions could be added. The point is that this study is anything but cold academia. Practical applications and benefits clearly are the fruit of this endeavor.

A brief summary of Biblical doctrine concerning the two natures of Christ

For the purposes of this essay we will divide the overview of the two natures of Christ into three parts:

1) The Union of the Two Natures;
2) The Communication (Communion) of the Two Natures; and
3) The Communication (Communion) of the Attributes of the Two Natures.

The Union of the Two Natures of Christ

In his book *Christology* John Schaller has set the tone of our study with these words: "*As it transcends our highest powers of conception, we can merely state [the unity of the Logos] as a fact and must avoid even the attempt of solving this divine mystery. The incarnation of the Son of God is an article of faith, not a problem for the philosopher" (57 ital. orig.).*

That said, Scripture does clearly teach in the passages below that the incarnation brought together the two natures of Christ in an indissoluble union and that neither His divine nor His human nature suffered any loss or change in their essential characteristics.

John 1:14*And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth*.

Galatians 4:4 *But when the fullness of the time had come, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the law.*

Colossians 2:9 *For in Him dwells all the fullness of the Godhead bodily*.

1 Timothy 3:16 *And without controversy great is the mystery of godliness: God was manifested in the flesh*. . . .

Hebrews 2:14*Inasmuch then as the children have partaken of flesh and blood, He Himself likewise shared in the same*. . . .

Of note in the passages above is that Scripture teaches not two Christs (one divine and one human) but one Christ. Neither did Jesus as true God cease to exist when he became true man (Col. 2:9). Instead, we have one Savior (one person) who ever since the incarnation is both true God and true man (two natures). Contrast this truth with the equally sublime truth of the Trinity, where Scripture teaches that we have but one God, but our God manifests Himself in and indeed exists as three distinct persons.

Is it any wonder, then, that in writing to Timothy, Paul exclaimed: *"Great is the mystery of godliness: God was manifested in the flesh, justified in the Spirit, seen by angels, preached among the Gentiles, believed on in the world, received up in glory"* **(1 Tim. 3:16 NKJ).** And again, praying for the Christians in Colossae *"that their hearts may be encouraged, being knit together in love, and attaining to all riches of the full assurance of understanding, to the knowledge of the mystery of God, both of the Father and of Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge"* **(Col. 2:2-3).**

It is, therefore, unique to the personal union of Christ to say: *God is man and man is God.* In fact, apart from Christ it is nonsensical to say *"God is man"* and blasphemous to say "*Man is God."* Some have compared the two natures of Christ to the inseparable nature of the body and soul in living human beings; yet even there no one would say that *the soul is body and the body is soul, recognizing also that the soul separates from the body in death.*

Scripture also teaches that while the two natures are separate and distinct, they cannot be separated. To hold to any doctrine that removes either nature—or any essential characteristic of either nature—is to teach a different Christ. Thus the union of the divine and human natures is not like two boards glued together. Once joined, the two natures have formed a *unity* in the God-man Jesus that is inseparable and eternal. The human nature was assumed into the divine nature at Jesus' incarnation, and that union will remain for all eternity.

We need to tread carefully here. Precise language is critical. Thus, for example, we say that Jesus—who was and is true God—died. Yet the divine nature cannot die. We can say, then, that the God-man Jesus died according to His human nature; yet to say that the human nature alone died is to divide the natures of Christ and is therefore unscriptural. The union of the two natures resulted in a Savior who is more than just the sum of those two natures. Statements that could rightly apply to either nature individually cannot always be applied to the incarnate Son of God.[2]

We ought not be surprised, then, to find lofty truths as we dig ever deeper into God's revealed wisdom. We are, after all, dealing with God's verbally inspired biblical truths, clearly taught but divinely majestic.

The Communication (Communion) of the Two Natures of Christ

An immediate and necessary result of the union of the two natures of Christ is the communication or communion[3] of those two natures. Here we define communion as *a permeation without confusion and conversion* (Pieper II:123). In other words, Jesus wasn't just true God in name only; He possessed *"all the fullness of the Godhead"* in bodily form. Neither was He true man in name only, which is the doctrinal sticking point for most false teachings in this area.

Yet despite what theologians call the interpenetration of the two natures in the person of Jesus Christ, both natures remain intact—neither losing any original, essential characteristic. This truth is taught in many passages, most notably:

> **John 1:14** *And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth.*
>
> **1 John 1:1-3** *That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon, and our hands have handled, concerning the Word of life—the life was manifested, and we have seen, and bear witness, and declare to you that eternal life which was with the Father and was manifested to us—that which we have seen and heard we declare to you, that you also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ.*

In the first passage John refers to the divine nature, and to the human nature in the second. From this we learn that we cannot separate from the Son of *God* the essential attributes of His human nature; nor can we separate from the Son of *Man* the essential attributes of His divine nature. Jesus Christ is and will remain to all eternity true God and true man in one person.

The Communication (Communion) of the Attributes of the Two Natures of Christ

We cannot speak of the communication of the two natures of Christ without also acknowledging the communication (sharing) of the attributes of those two natures. Before we can talk of *sharing* attributes, however, we must define what they are. In the narrowest definition an attribute is an essential characteristic. The word is also used in a wider sense (as Pieper does here in his *Dogmatics*) to include also "everything that the natures do or suffer according to their respective essence. . . , as, for instance, to create and to be created, to give life and to lay down the life, and the like" (Pieper 130). Rightly understanding that the two natures form a union in Christ also dictates that we understand and acknowledge the sharing of the attributes of the two natures.

The Formula of Concord, speaking with its usual precision and clarity, sums up the issue in this way:

> The chief question has been, Because of personal union in the person of Christ, do the divine and human natures, together with their properties, *really* (that is, in deed and truth) share with each other, and how far does this sharing extend?
>
> The Sacramentarians have asserted that in Christ the divine and human natures are personally united in such a way that neither of the two *really* (that is, in deed and truth) shares in the properties of the other but have in common only the name. They declare boldly that the "personal union makes merely the names common," so that God is called man and a man is called God, but that God really (that is, in deed and in truth) has nothing in common with the humanity and that the humanity really has nothing in common with the deity, its majesty, and it properties. Dr. Luther and his followers have contended for the opposite view. . . . *(Tappert 487 ital. orig.)*

In its Affirmative Theses on this question the Formula of Concord lays out the correct Scriptural position:

2. We believe, teach, and confess that the divine and the human natures are not fused into one essence and that the one is not changed into the other, but that each retains its essential properties and that they never become the properties of the other nature.
3. The properties of the divine nature are omnipotence, eternity, infinity, and (according to its natural property, by itself) omnipresence, omniscience, etc., which never become properties of the human nature.
4. The attributes of the human nature are to be a corporeal creature, to be flesh and blood, to be finite and circumscribed, to suffer, to die, to ascend and to descend, to move from place to place, to

endure hunger, thirst, cold, heat, and the like, which never become the properties of the divine nature.

5. Since both natures are united personally (that is, in one person) we believe, teach, and confess that this personal union is not a combination or connection of such a kind that neither nature has anything in common with the other personally (that is, on account of the personal union), as when two boards are glued together and neither gives anything to or takes anything from the other. On the contrary, here is the highest communion which God truly has with man. Out of this personal union and the resultant exalted and ineffable sharing there flows everything human that is said or believed about God and everything divine that is said or believed about Christ the man. . . . *(Tappert 487-88)*

In breaking it down further toward a better understanding of the scriptural teaching on the communication of attributes, Lutheran theologians have identified the classes or types (*genera*) of attributes as these three: *Genus Idiomaticum*, *Genus Majestaticum*, and *Genus Apotelesmaticum*.

The first group or genus (*Idiomaticum*) includes all those Scripture statements in which an attribute (idiom) of one nature is also affirmed of or declared to the other nature. As a few examples consider the following passages:

1 Peter 3:18 *For Christ also suffered once for sins, the just for the unjust, that He might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh but made alive by the Spirit.*

Hebrews 13:8 *Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever.*

Acts 3:14-15 "*But you denied the Holy One and the Just, . . . and killed the Prince of life, whom God raised from the dead, of which we are witnesses.*"

Note in these passages how Christ (the "Anointed One") in His entirety suffered, how the God-man Jesus Christ was and is eternal (not just according to one or the other nature), and how the divine "Holy One" and "Prince of life" was able to be killed.

Logical inconsistencies immediately arise when we (rightly) allow Scripture to shape our opinions in this matter. How, for example, could Jesus be both eternal and eight days old? How could He be the Creator of all things and yet have His birth announced by the angels that He Himself created? How could He be all-knowing and yet grow in wisdom and not know the hour of judgment?

As with many other Scripture truths (e.g., the Trinity) here we are certainly taught the truth, but that does not mean that we are going to be capable of fully comprehending that truth. As one writer put it: "In an ecclesiastical climate where many church leaders are saying in effect: 'Listen, God, I'm talking,' we want to say: 'Speak, Lord, I'm listening'" (Jeske 6).

The second group or genus (*majestaticum*) includes those passages where characteristics of Jesus' divine nature are described as having been communicated to His human nature. In these passages the *man* Jesus is credited with qualities like divine authority, omniscience, omnipotence, and omnipresence.

Matthew 28:18, 20 *And Jesus came and spoke to them, saying, "All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. . . ; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age."*

Luke 5:22 *But when Jesus perceived their thoughts, He answered and said to them, "Why are you reasoning in your hearts?"*

John 4:16-18 *Jesus said to her, "Go, call your husband, and come here." The woman answered and said, "I have no husband." Jesus said to her, "You have well said, 'I have no husband,' for you have had five husbands, and the one whom you now have is not your husband; in that you spoke truly."*

Matthew 18:20 "*For where two or three are gathered together in My name, I am there in the midst of them.*"

We note again how Jesus (the personal, human name of the Savior) is claiming His omnipotence ("*all authority has been given to Me*") and His omnipresence ("*I am with you always*" and "*I am there in the midst of them*"), as well as using His omniscience ("*Jesus perceived their thoughts*").

The third group or genus (*apotelesmaticum*)[4] includes those passages that describe the works of Jesus in which both natures contribute to the completion of an action in intimate harmony (or communication) with each other.

Luke 2:11 "*For there is born to you this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.*" "Christ the Lord"—a reference to His divine nature—was "born," an action clearly attributed to the human nature.

> **1 Corinthians 15:3-5** *Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He rose again the third day according to the Scriptures, and that He was seen by Cephas, then by the twelve*.

Note again how Christ—a divine nature reference—is affirmed to have died and risen from the dead, which are actions that necessitated the Savior having a human nature.

> **Galatians 1:3-5** *Grace to you and peace from God the Father and our Lord Jesus Christ, who gave Himself for our sins, that He might deliver us from this present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father, to whom be glory forever and ever*.

Note here especially how the divine "Lord Jesus Christ" as a whole "gave Himself"—an action only possible in that He also possessed a human nature.

Reformed Error and Its Implication

The root question at issue in this study is not just a review of the two natures of Christ and their communication, but also how the Lutheran and Reformed teachings differ on the subject. Given their preoccupation with human reason, together with the preeminent role reason plays in their theology, it should come as no surprise that the Reformed reject the sublime truths that Scripture clearly teaches also in connection with the communication of attributes, since those truths often create logical complications for the human intellect. Nor are the differences minor, for they pertain to (and in effect destroy) key elements of the Christian faith.

A key component of Reformed doctrine in this area is the mantra that "the finite is not capable of the infinite." This means, for example, that after His incarnation the Son of God is not omnipresent according to His human nature. His presence, therefore, is and must always be limited to one location—an assertion that has obvious implications for their understanding of the real presence in Holy Communion.

Scripture teaches that "in addition to its natural, local, and visible mode of subsistence, also a divine and invisible [mode of subsistence] which transcends all limitations of space" was given to Jesus at His conception (Pieper 126).

In John 20, for example, we read that on more than one occasion Jesus appeared among the gathered disciples, despite the fact that the doors were locked. We are further told that His body still possessed the capacity to occupy space, as the disciples were able to touch and feel Him. The obvious conclusion is that Jesus possessed also an invisible, non-local mode of subsistence. Nor was this ability given only to the risen and glorified Christ, since He also exhibited such powers prior to His resurrection, as shown in these passages.

> **Luke 4:28-30** *So all those in the synagogue, when they heard these things, were filled with wrath, and rose up and thrust Him out of the city; and they led Him to the brow of the hill on which their city was built, that they might throw Him down over the cliff. Then passing through the midst of them, He went His way*.
>
> **John 8:59** *Then they took up stones to throw at Him; but Jesus hid Himself and went out of the temple, going through the midst of them, and so passed by*.

It is both predictable and telling that the Reformed seek the logical to justify their skepticism at the clear words of Scripture. So also in John 20 they seek an open window or hole in the roof to justify their preconceived notions that the finite body of Jesus was incapable of exhibiting any divine

characteristics. In so doing, they essentially accuse the inspired writers of culpable deception, since Scripture clearly indicates a miraculous coming and going.[5]

The Reformed separate the Son of God (divine nature) from the suffering and death of the Son of Man (human nature). The implications here are sobering, to say the least. If true God did not die for the sins of the world, that debt remains unpaid. Psalm 49:7-8 reveals the high price of salvation when it claims: *"None of them can by any means redeem his brother, nor give to God a ransom for him—for the redemption of their souls is costly."* If a man could be born without sin and live a sinless life, he would certainly save himself, but no one else. If it was just a human being named Jesus who died on the cross of Calvary, he saved only himself, and the rest of mankind is lost.

The Reformed approach obviously has been forced to admit that Scripture does ascribe suffering and death to the whole person of the Christ, the Son of God, but their explanation is that this is done only as a figure of speech (*alloeosis*) in which the reader knows instinctively to change whatever noun or subject is used by the Holy Spirit in a given verse to the correct word or phrase, or to add the words necessary for true clarity or accuracy. If, for example, Scripture says, *"You killed the Prince of Life"* in Acts 3:15, the reader is to insert the words *the human nature of* so that it means: You killed the human nature of the Prince of Life.

This also brings into sharper focus how or why so many who profess to be Christians nonetheless regard Jesus as nothing more than a good example. To deny what Scripture teaches concerning the communication of attributes is to deny that the God-man died, and that He thereby provided a full and complete *substitutionary* payment for the sins of the world. They view Calvary as the unjust death of a good example—an example, many believe, that we must follow if we are to be saved. This is the most common misconception of the Christian faith, and it can be traced not only to a denial or perversion of the communication of attributes, but also to the influence of every other man-made religion. All teach some sort of debt that man himself has to repay. Those who see the dying Jesus as only a man are left with no choice but to see him as an example of what they themselves must do to earn God's love and acceptance.

As noted earlier, any misunderstanding of the communication of attributes will have an impact on the doctrine of the real presence in Holy Communion. Roman Catholic doctrine, for example, holds that the bread and wine are transubstantiated into the body and blood of Christ during the Mass. To explain this, they essentially borrow language from Aristotle when they distinguish between the "essence" or "substance" of something and the external, tangible qualities (*accidens*) of that object.

Thus according to Roman Catholic doctrine, the essence or substance of the bread and wine are miraculously changed (tran-substantiated) into the body and blood of Christ, while the *accidens* remain as they were. In essence they have catered to human reason, in much the same way as the Reformed. This also helps to explain their otherwise inexplicable "bloodless sacrifice" in the mass. In Roman Catholic dogma Christ is "re-sacrificed" during each Mass, but only according to what they again call the *essence* of the transubstantiated body and blood. The *accidens* remain consistent and undisturbed during the ceremony, and therefore the sacrifice is bloodless. Both errors are rooted in a denial of what the Bible teaches concerning the two natures of Christ and the communication of the attributes of those two natures—which are separate yet inseparable.

The Reformed have had two different approaches or opinions concerning the Lord's Supper. On the one hand, John Calvin insisted on the "true presence" of Christ in the sacrament, but only according to the divine nature, not according to the human. His error, then, was rooted in his false understanding of the communication of attributes. To Calvin the human nature of Christ remains localized in heaven and nowhere else. He would admit that we commune with the human nature of Christ in the Lord's Supper, but essentially divides Christ by teaching that we commune with the human nature only through the divine nature, which remains united to the human.

Therefore Calvin also found himself at odds with Zwingli, who wanted to reduce real presence to symbolism and the Lord's Supper to a memorial meal. Zwingli's error was not so much a misunderstanding of the communication of attributes but a total disregard for the clear, verbally inspired words of the Savior.

Conclusion

Small points of doctrine never remain small points of doctrine, which is why there is no such thing as a small point of doctrine. Careful attention to the details laid out in Scripture on all points is the only thing that will prevent God's Church from wandering into error. Often those truths are too sublime to be fully grasped by the human intellect; yet they remain true, and thus a vital element of the "whole counsel" of God's Word (Acts 20:27).

May God continue to favor us with His grace to the end that we continue to believe, affirm, teach, and practice all things that God in His Word has taught and commanded.

Endnotes

[1] "Hypostatic" is derived from the Greek word ὑπόστασις in Hebrews 1:3, "*substantial nature, essence,*" and refers simply to the fact that Jesus has two separate natures in one person as both true God and true man.

[2] A parallel of sorts occurs in human beings from the moment of their conversion. For example, the statement "*The Law according to its third use has a didactic purpose"* applies neither to the old man nor the new man. It is a true statement only in that it applies to the Christian insofar as he is both.

[3] In this context "communication" and "communion" are used synonymously by theologians.

[4] From the Greek word ἀποτέλειος or ἀποτελέω, which refers to "the final result to be accomplished."

[5] Compare also the implication that Moses essentially lied when he gave clear indication that all creation took place at God's command in six natural and consecutive days.

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The Flacian Controversy:
Thank God that Leveler heads prevailed!

Paul G. Fleischer

Introduction / Background:

In a previous essay printed in the *Journal* (June 2014, pp. 22-46),[1] the undersigned addressed in Bente's *Historical Introductions* Article XIV on "The Synergistic Controversy." It would be most logical, then, to follow that up with the Flacian Controversy, which in effect was spawned by the Synergistic Controversy.

I freely admit that these respective studies have been good for me personally as a review of that critical time in the history of the confessional Lutheran Church. I freely admit a lapsing memory about this history. To get some kind of handle on it all, I had to do some diligent revisiting of the historical accounts of the respective controversies and, in connection with the essay that follows, the role played by Flacius.

In the process I came upon a hand-written "Table" I had prepared and scotch-taped into the back cover of my *Concordia Triglotta* during my seminary days. It has the title "CONTROVERSIES following the Leipzig Interim and settled by the Formula of Concord (May 29, 1577)." For myself back then and certainly now the Table helps sort through the confusion of the rather convoluted and complicated historical details as far as the when, why, and wherefore of the respective controversies, the particular

topic or topics in dispute, and a listing in separate columns of the "Chief Errorists" and "(Chief) Opponents of the Error" [Ed. — See p. 52 for a reduced form of Fleischer's Table].

As far as the latter is concerned, most interesting and intriguing for me was the discovery (or re-discovery) of the fact that at least a couple of the very significant contributors to our orthodox Lutheran Reformation heritage, Melanchthon and Flacius, appear not infrequently in both columns! That simple observation is itself a testimony to the marked intensity of the scriptural discussions, debates, and controversies happening in the years and decades following Luther's death in 1546. For a whole lot of reasons it is good for us to revisit these controversies, not the least reason being that, with God's blessing, we become reassured that our orthodox Lutheran roots are what and where they are and should be—firmly grounded in the soil of God's pure and perfectly clear Word of truth as given to us in the divinely inspired Scriptures.

As far as the two men mentioned above are concerned, we are likely more aware of Melanchthon's dissimilar roles. After being the one chiefly responsible for writing the Apology (1530), sadly, it was the same Philip who was primarily responsible for penning that compromise document called the "Leipzig Interim" in 1548. Bente writes in ¶126 "Provisions of Leipzig Interim" that "the Leipzig Interim, too, was in every respect a truce over the corpse of true Lutheranism. It was a unionistic document sacrificing Lutheranism doctrinally as well as practically. . . . Tschackert is correct in maintaining that, in the articles of justification and of the Church, 'the fundamental thoughts of the Reformation doctrine were catholicized' by the Leipzig Interim. Even the Lutheran *sola* (*sola fide*, by faith alone) is omitted in the article of justification" (Bente 99).

Referring to the chosen subtitle for this particular review of Bente's *Historical Introductions*, it became clear that, should Dr. Luther's reformation not be scuttled, there was a desperate need for "leveler heads" to prevail!

And this is where Flacius (for one) comes into the picture, as noted by Klug:

> *After Leipzig leadership among the Lutherans was up for grabs. Theologians like Matthias Flacius, Johann Heermann, Nikolaus von Amsdorf, Kaspar Aquila, and Johann Wigand competed for the post Melanchthon had lost by default. The talented and fiery Flacius, originally from the Balkan region of Illyria, proved at first to be the most eloquent spokesman for loyal Lutheran teaching, and he vigorously opposed Melanchthon, his old colleague on the Wittenberg Faculty.*[2]
>
> *But politics, more than theology, shaped unfolding events. . . .*[3] *With the Peace of Augsburg, 1555, Lutherans for the first time gained the right to exist and practice their faith freely.*
>
> *But by this time the victory was bittersweet, for within the Lutheran church itself there was chaos. Dissension and disunity reigned as a result of the struggle between conservative and moderate factions, between those concerned to keep Lutheran teaching pure and those somewhat indifferent to doctrinal purity and open to compromise. . . . Polarization of theological positions around leaders like Melanchthon and Flacius became intense. Each side claimed heirship to the Augsburg Confession and the other Lutheran Confessions. The "Philippists" (named after Philipp Melanchthon) stood for a moderate, compromise position in doctrine; the "Gnesio-Lutherans" (that is, "genuine Lutherans"—so they claimed to be), following Flacius, stood for absolute loyalty and strict, stern discipline in accord with Lutheran principles.* (Klug 13)

What stuck out for me in my Table of Controversies was the fact that the name Flacius appears five times in the "(Chief) Opponents of the Error" column. That alone prompts our thanks and praise to God that he was one of the more influential, positive level heads during the decade following Luther's death!

For example, in speaking of the Adiaphoristic Controversy and in particular the role of Flacius therein, we note the following observations of Bente:

> *Foremost among the champions of true Lutheranism over against the Interimists were John Hermann, Aquila, Nicholas Amsdorf, John Wigand, Alberus, Gallus, Matthias Judex, Westphal, and especially Matthias Flacius Illyricus, then (from 1544 to 1549) a member of the Wittenberg faculty, where he opposed all concessions to the Adiaphorists. It is due, no doubt, to Flacius more than to any other individual that true Lutheranism and with it the Lutheran Church was saved from annihilation in consequence of the Interims.* (100, ¶127)

The theological position which Flacius and his fellow-combatants occupied over against the Adiaphorists was embodied in the Tenth Article of the Formula of Concord, *and thus endorsed by the Lutheran Church as a whole. Frank says concerning this most excellent article which our Church owes to the faithfulness of the Anti-Melanchthonians, notably Flacius: "The theses which received churchly recognition in the* Formula of Concord *were those of Flacius*". . . .

Even Melanchthon. . .finally yielded to the arguments of his opponents and admitted that they were right. . . . (112, ¶141)

The positive contributions of Flacius to sound and sober (that's what is meant by "level-headed") Biblical Lutheran theology is recognized, more or less, by other theologians and church historians also. F. Pieper has in Volume 1 of his *Christian Dogmatics* a quote stating that "*Flacius has been 'habitually and from ignorance' condemned beyond all measure"* (qtd. in Bente 549). This comment concludes a longer footnote which elaborates on the fact that, while he was on the right track, Flacius used extreme terminology, which couldn't be condoned, regarding original sin as a "substance" rather than an "accident." Unfortunately, as we will be getting into shortly, Flacius drifted off course in his doctrinal contentions, sullying not only his own name and the Gnesio-Lutheran party, but even the very gospel itself, which he for so long and so zealously had upheld and defended.

In my previous essay on the Synergistic Controversy the point was made that the spiritual level-headedness of Flacius had led the way against the errorists—even though, as viewed from hindsight, there appeared to be a hint of trouble ahead for the well-intending man. A few quotes from that essay are repeated here below:

Flacius (Illyricus) was one of the leading spokesmen against synergism. He and other Anti-Synergists endorsed Luther's monergism of grace, being forced to declare their position publicly at a 1557 colloquy in Worms with representatives from Rome. Thank God the Anti-Synergists would not condemn Luther's doctrine of the complete bondage of the human will. (Fleischer 28)

This latter statement could be a sort of red flag signaling the area in which Flacius would, unfortunately, go off the beam, but as Bente notes: "*It will always be regarded as a redeeming feature that it was in antagonizing synergism and championing the Lutheran* sola gratia *that Flacius coined his unhappy proposition*" (146, ¶168). Returning to the previous essay, "The Synergistic Controversy," there it was stated that "*Strigel's position in the bitter controversy was 'based on the error that a remnant of spiritual ability still remains in natural man.' That, in effect, denied that man by nature is truly spiritually dead, but reserves some spark of life. Flacius took vigorous exception, asserting that Strigel's position was essentially a form of Pelagianism all over again"* (Fleischer 35). Again in hindsight it would seem as no mere coincidence that the same Strigel would trap Flacius into making some unguarded, extreme statements. Perhaps foretelling danger ahead for the well-meaning spokesman of the Gnesio-Lutherans, the summary in "Synergistic Controversy" continued thus: "*It was Flacius again who took up the scriptural cause, stating he was, in fact, willing to distinguish between cooperation* before *and* after *conversion. That, however, was not good enough for Strigel, who 'protested again and again that man is not like a block or stone when he is converted.' In defense of his position Flacius 'explained that in his conversion man is able to cooperate just as little as a stone can contribute to its transformation into a statue' (Bente 140. . .)"* (Fleischer 35).

Thus in attempting to offer some kind of helpful historical review and background, we proceed to the task at hand. In my "Table of Controversies" the name of Flacius occurs five times in the "(Chief) Opponents of the Error" column—God be praised!—and but once in the "Chief Errorists" column. It is the sad chapter of the latter that we shall examine in more detail, with Bente's detailed material in "XV. The Flacian Controversy" providing a broad outline.

167. Flacius Entrapped by Strigel;
168. Context in which Statement was Made.

In giving the biographical information of Flacius (born March 3, 1520, in Illyria, therefore having the nickname Illyricus), who was "*one of the most learned and capable theologians of his day and the most faithful, devoted, staunch, zealous, and able exponent and defender of genuine Lutheranism,"* Bente begins the sorry tale of "*the malignant controversy which bears his name"* (144). Dr. Walther's (oft-

quoted) remark, first made in 1877 on the occasion of the 300th anniversary of the Formula of Concord, is given: "*It was a great pity that Flacius, who had hitherto been such a faithful champion of the pure doctrine, exposed himself to the enemies in such a manner. Henceforth the errorists were accustomed to brand all those as Flacianists who were zealous in defending the pure doctrine of Luther"* (qtd. in Bente 144). Dare say, doubtless there are those who might be inclined to label as hyper-Lutheran Flacianists those who are conservative theologians and zealous defenders of Luther's doctrine some four-plus centuries later. What we would surely reject, however, is any linkage of our doctrinal stance with Flacius's error in regard to original sin.

It was around the year 1560 (an end point, of sorts, to the Synergistic Controversy and the beginning, of sorts, to the Flacian) that things started to take on a focus that trouble was in the air: "*The synergistic controversy received new zest and a new impetus when, in 1559, Victorin Strigel and Huegel . . . opposed Flacius, . . .championed the doctrine of Melanchthon, and refused to endorse the so-called* Book of Confutation *which Flacius had caused to be drafted. . . . In order to settle the differences, Flacius and his colleagues (Wigand, Judex, Simon Musaeus), as well as Strigel, asked for a public disputation. . . . The disputation was held at Weimar, August 2 to 8, 1560*" (Bente 133-34, ¶158-59).

Strigel and Flacius went toe-to-toe at the Weimar Disputation, with Strigel defending Melanchthon's doctrine of the "three causes" of conversion being the Holy Spirit, the Word of God, and the will of man "feebly assenting" to the gospel.[4] "*Flacius, on the other hand, defended the mere passive of Luther*," asserting that man before conversion "*does not in any way cooperate with the Holy Spirit, but merely suffers and experiences His operations. At the same time, however, he seriously damaged and discredited himself as well as the sacred cause of divine truth by maintaining that original sin is not a mere accident, such as Strigel maintained, but the very substance of man"* (Bente 134, ¶159).

So it is that the Flacian Controversy had sprung from the Synergistic. Included among the various extreme and extravagant statements of Flacius—at Weimar and as time went on—are such listings as these: "By original sin man is 'transformed into the image of Satan.' By original sin 'the substance of man is destroyed'; after the Fall original sin is the substance of man; man's nature is identical with sin; in conversion a new substance is created by God" (qtd. in Bente 144).

With such comments Flacius contended all along that he was only defending Luther's doctrine as well as the Bible. "*I have said that Scripture and Luther affirm that it* [original sin] *is a substance"* (qtd. in Bente 144).[5]

It was in many ways a war of words. Bente calls attention to how the "Formula of Concord *carefully explains*" in Article I on Original Sin the following:

> *Also, to avoid strife about words, aequivocationes vocabulorum, that is, words and expressions which are applied and used in various meanings, should be carefully and distinctly explained; as when it is said: God creates the nature of men, there by the term* nature *the essence, body, and soul of men are understood. But often the disposition or vicious quality of a thing is called its nature, as when it is said: It is the nature of the serpent to bite and poison. Thus Luther says that sin and sinning are the disposition and nature of corrupt man. . . . Luther himself explains that by nature-sin, person-sin, essential sin he means that not only the words, thoughts, and works are sin, but that the entire nature, person, and essence of man are altogether corrupted from the root by original sin.* (qtd. in Bente 145)

Thankfully, Flacius's close friends Wigand and Musaeus were more level-headed than their compatriot, trying to warn their leader that equating original sin with man's substance was going overboard, in effect, implying that God as creator would then be responsible for such a condition! On the other hand, to say that Satan was the creator of this evil "substance" smacked of the ancient heresy of the Manicheans.[6]

As to the context of Flacius's "fatal phrase" statement, Bente offers a manner of speaking that Flacius might better have used to make the case vs. Strigel's Semi-Pelagian teaching. When asked by Strigel whether he denied that original sin was an accident, it would have been more level-headed—in line with Scriptural teaching—for Flacius to respond as Bente has suggested below:

> *Instead of replying as he did, Flacius should have cleared the sophistical atmosphere by explaining: "If I say, 'Original sin is an accident,' you [Strigel] will infer what I reject,* viz. *that the corrupt will of man retains the power to decide also in favor of the operations of the Holy Spirit. And if I answer*

that original sin is not an accident (such as you have in mind), you will again infer what I disavow, viz., *that man, who by the Fall has lost the ability to will in the spiritual direction, has* eo ipso *lost the will and its freedom entirely and as such.*

After noting the outcome of what Flacius actually said in response, Bente concludes: "With all his soul Flacius rejected the synergism involved in Strigel's question. His blunder was, as stated, that he did so in terms universally regarded as Manichean" (145).

169. Formal and Material Substance; 170. Further Explanations of Flacius; 171. Controversy Precipitated by Flacius.

Bente's "Historical Introductions to the Symbolical Books"— in general and to this controversy in particular—have gone far more deeply into the philosophical bantering than most of us, I dare say, might be inclined to do. That said, we who yet believe in the verbal inspiration of Scripture do understand the need for careful examination of what the Spirit of God is saying in any given Scripture passage and therefore about any particular Scripture doctrine or concept.

In our short history we in the CLC have found that controversy,[7] while trying and testing, can indeed be a blessing to the church as we delve into Scripture—with a *quia* acceptance of the Lutheran Confessions as well—to determine exactly what the Spirit of God has to say to us. It is, I submit, a bane to the church if we allow our instant, high-tech, "I-want-the-answer-short-and-sweet-right-now" societal milieu to dictate our spiritual and religious (educational) life. As a participant in the Third Use of the Law controversy—being among those memorializing the CLC Convention, seeking clarification of what exactly the Bible teaches on the subject and what the Confessions teach, and then comparing with those two sources exactly what the synod's position was—I recall considerable uneasiness and impatience within the body over the "war of words." Yet by the grace of God what was finally accepted as the settlement of the issue was and remains, I am convinced, a great blessing. In short, the doctrinal struggle we had was truly worth it.

What is said here is in keeping with article reprints appearing in the March 2011 *Journal of Theology*. The two articles referred to here were written when the *Journal* was launched with its February issue in 1961. In his "Foreword" to the inaugural issue the first editor, Prof. Edmund Reim, carefully explained that a church body which came into existence as a result of controversy could not and would not steer away from addressing controversial issues, though acknowledging as well that "*to live on controversy alone. . .would prove to be a sorry luxury, one that we simply cannot afford*" (*Journal* 4). This "Foreword" by Reim gives way to an article by Prof. Reim's colleague, Egbert Schaller, under the title "The Form of Sound Words," in which it is said:

> *Orthodox pastors concerned with the task of keeping the Faith inviolate are well aware of the fact that not all who retain in their form the use of healthy, traditional words and expressions in theological discussion do so in the spirit of the Apostle. Satan has devised semantic means for corrupting doctrine through the employment of scriptural terms with a change in connotation. The words have the old, familiar ring; but both content and context have been altered. The powerful and idiomatic scriptural terminology, by a subtle process of exinanition, has in some quarters been divested of its divine definitions and filled with a human content which makes it a fruitful exponent of error. Thus the modernist advances his destructive cause, not by excising such key terms as righteousness, salvation, atonement, reconciliation, inspiration, and many others from his theological parlance, but by withdrawing them from the analogy of Scripture and arbitrarily investing them with human and unscriptural concepts, employing them liberally in their perverted sense to the confusion of the simple. Healthy words cease to be healthy when the inspired content is aborted. They thereby become additions to the list of "vain words" by which men are deceived (Eph. 5:6).* (*Journal* 8)

This writing and these good words bring to mind a classic 1968 essay of Prof. Schaller to the CLC Convention of that year, titled "*The Virtue of Christian Sobriety*." Your essayist, recently out of seminary in 1964, recalls hearing the essay in person, delivered in the Northwest Hall assembly room at Immanuel Lutheran College, which played host to the delegates. We don't intend to use the adjective "classic" lightly. Read and enjoy, praying as you read that the CLC today may live up to the holy advice passed along to a fledgling synod by this gifted synodical forefather.[8]

As much as and perhaps more than just about any other, the Flacian Controversy was about the "form of sound words"—and this is the basis for what I have chosen to label as "level-headed," that is, not going off the deep end. We turn to another historical resource, Willard Allbeck's *Studies in the Lutheran Confessions*, to expand on the controversy:

> *It must be noted that Flacius distinguished between* substantia materialis*—the stuff of which a thing is composed—and* substantia formalis*—the form it takes. He seems to have meant the latter when he said that sin is* substantia. *Yet he steadily refused to abandon this misleading phraseology, even though he was willing to use also other phrases which had the approval of such men as Andreae. Not long afterward when there was a change of rulers, Flacius lost his professorship at Jena, was declined residence in Strassburg and Frankfort, and after some years of wandering died in 1575.*
>
> *The question at issue in the controversy, therefore, concerned a precise definition of original sin. The* Augsburg Confession *in Article II had affirmed and briefly defined original sin. But is original sin the essence of human nature, or is it merely an attribute? Is it proper to distinguish theologically between man's nature and original sin as corrupting that nature?*

Then this is said:

> *Lest anyone think this is "unnecessary wrangling," the Solid Declaration promptly points out the importance of the problem. For if the undisturbed goodness of human nature is affirmed, the result is Pelagianism—a serious perversion of the gospel as the church generally recognizes. On the other hand, if out of a dualistic idea of the existence of good substances and evil substances (light and darkness), it is held that sin is merely the evil stuff oozing into sight, we are confronted with a Manichaean conception—something quite foreign to Christianity and vigorously opposed by the ancient church.* (Allbeck 256-7)

The Formula of Concord has said in addressing the subject:

> *"Everything that is must be either* substantia*, that is, a self-existent essence, or* accidens*, that is, an accidental matter, which does not exist by itself essentially, but is in another self-existent essence and can be distinguished from it."*
>
> *". . .* [I]*f the question be asked whether original sin is a substance, that is, such a thing as exists by itself, and is not in another, or whether it is an* accidens*, that is, such a thing as does not exist by itself, but is in another, and cannot exist or be by itself, he must confess straight and pat that original sin is no substance, but an accident."* (qtd. in Bente 146, ¶169)

As far as terminology is concerned, it is interesting to note what the more recent *Reader's Edition of the Book of Concord* has to say in its "Controversies" introduction to the Formula of Concord: "*This controversy has a lot to do with the use of philosophical terms, which Luther always warned against using, particularly as one preached and taught Christian laity. Such terms provided great potential for needless offense, confusion, and misunderstanding. This controversy* [Flacian] *certainly justified Luther's concern"* (*Concordia* 470).[9]

Bente's section 171 details how trapped the well-meaning Flacius was by his overstatements. From the Weimar Disputation of 1560 on through 1572, he spoke, debated, and wrote tract after treatise in defense of his position, claiming that his position was being mischaracterized, etc., all the while rejecting the considerable overtures of his fellow Gnesio-Lutherans to moderate his tone and extreme expressions. It is surely a pity to read the summation of one historian (Schluesselburg) that ". . . '*intoxicated with ambition, and relying, in the heat of conflict, too much on the acumen and sagacity of his own mind, Illyricus haughtily spurned the brotherly and faithful admonitions of all his colleagues'*" (qtd. in Bente 148-9).

172. Publications Pro and Con; 173. Adherents of Flacius; 174. Decision of Formula of Concord.

Thank God for the level-headed approach of the apologists! In responding to yet another writing by Flacius, the "second Martin" Chemnitz said, "*It is enough if we are able to retain what Luther has won; let us abandon all desires to go beyond and to improve upon him"* (qtd. in Bente 149). Men like Moerlin, Wigand, and Hesshusius likewise responded, the latter charging that Flacius "*made the devil a creator of substance"* (Bente 150) and taught that the "*devil created and made man, the devil is man's*

potter" (qtd. in Bente 150).[10] Wigand characterized the Flacian doctrine in his 1571 book, *On Original Sin*: *"Original sin laughs, talks, sews, sows, works, reads, writes, preaches, baptizes, administers the Lord's Supper, etc. For it is the substance of man that does such thing. Behold where such men end!"* Wigand also added in answer to a response from Flacius: *"Evil of the substance and evil substance are not identical"* (qtd. in Bente 150).

Already in 1572 and again in 1576 Hesshusius argued against Flacius in print: *"If original sin is the substance of the soul, then we are compelled to assert one of two things,* viz., *either that Satan is the creator of substance, or that God is the creator and preserver of sin"* (qtd. in Bente 150).

As a classic example of the student carrying things out farther than his teacher, Flacius kept on publishing in his own defense, *"apparently never for a moment doubting that he was but defending Luther's doctrine"* (Bente 150). And he had his adherents. When he died on March 11, 1575, at Frankfort-on-the-Main, some forty Lutheran ministers of Austria are said to have shared his views. In fact, *"In 1581 the Flacianists in Austria issued a declaration against the* Formula of Concord, *charging its teaching to be inconsistent with Luther's doctrine on original sin. As late as 1604 there were numerous Flacianists in German Austria"* (Bente 151).

At the beginning of section 174, "Decision of Formula of Concord," Bente brings in the observation of Seeberg: "Flacius was not a heretic, but in the wrangle of his day he was branded as such, and this has been frequently repeated." Bente notes that a few other historians held a similar view over against Flacius. Nevertheless, Bente also states that "the unfortunate phrases of Flacius produced, and were bound to produce, most serious religious offense, as well as theological strife, and hopeless doctrinal confusion. . . . Accordingly, the first article of the Formula of Concord rejects both the synergistic as well as the Manichean aberrations in the doctrine of original sin" (151).

Our synod came into existence because we were convinced from Scripture that doctrinal error is dangerous, that its leaven can spread, ultimately undermining the gospel. To help souls entrusted to us to understand and recognize this danger, it is good to show the following from the "The Controversy about Original Sin":

> *If taken to its logical conclusion, Flacius's position would require us to believe that God Himself is the creator and cause of sin. . . . He* [Flacius] *would not recognize where his zealous defense of truth was leading him—into more error.*
>
> *Article I of the Formula of Concord, therefore, had to make clear what the Bible teaches. Since the fall, human nature is not sin itself, but it is sinful. The Formula wisely points out that to suggest God created sin would mean that God's Son assumed sin itself into divinity in the incarnation. What is more, if sin is part of a person's very substance, then it too will be resurrected on the Last Day to spend eternity in heaven, an absurd idea, in view of Scripture.*
>
> *The incident with Flacius is a good warning to those who are zealous to defend truth. They must not go so far in defending truth that they end up in error through overstatement or overreaction.* (*Concordia* 471)

Indeed, the basic doctrines of our faith—the entire *corpus doctrinae,* including creation, Christ's incarnation, the sinner's sanctification, and bodily resurrection—would be and are subtly undermined by Flacianism. So says the Formula of Concord itself: *"Therefore it is unchristian and horrible to hear that original sin is baptized in the name of the Holy Trinity, sanctified, and saved, and other similar expressions found in the writings of the recent Manicheans, with which we will not offend simple-minded people"* (qtd. in Bente 151).

Before concluding the background history of this controversy, Bente is quick to point out the balanced presentation in the *Formula of Concord*. While clearly rejecting Flacianism, its authors were just as determined to uphold the scriptural teaching about original sin's disastrous effects. Careful examination leads to the conclusion that the whole of orthodox Reformation Lutheranism is ultimately built upon the correct scriptural teaching regarding original sin. Bente notes that "*in designating original sin as an accident, its corruption is not minimized in the least. . . . 'For the Scriptures,' says the* Formula, '*testify that original sin is an unspeakable evil and such an entire corruption of human nature that in it and all its internal and external powers nothing pure or good remains, but everything is entirely corrupt,*

so that on account of original sin man in God's sight is truly spiritually dead, with all his powers dead to that which is good" (Bente 151-2).

Thus, the error of Flacius notwithstanding, Strigelism and also Semi-Pelagianism, which wants to reserve at least some credit to man for his own conversion, were and are soundly rejected.

Final Observations / Conclusion

In connection with all this, it is good to keep in mind the observations of Pieper: "*It is particularly the doctrine of the original guilt which has aroused the antagonism of man"* (538). That antagonism is obvious in countless ways in this fallen world, so much so that even many would-be Christian churches reject it. The doctrine of original sin (original guilt) is rejected by "*Pelagians, Socinians, Arminians, Quakers, and even some modern Lutherans"* who *"insist that only that can be charged against man as a transgression which he has himself committed. The antagonism runs the whole gamut, from simple denial to outright blasphemy"* (Pieper 538). On its part *"Rome teaches . . . that the inclination to sin . . . which remains after Baptism is no longer sin, although Scripture sometimes calls it sin. 'With regard to this concupiscence, which the Apostle sometimes calls sin (Rom. 6:7-8; Colossians 3), the holy Synod declares that the Catholic Church has never understood it to be called sin, as being truly and properly sin in those born again, but because it is of sin and inclines to sin'. . ."* (Pieper 542, fn. 29).

Besides most of visible Christendom getting it all wrong, it does not surprise to read what Islam has to say and teach on the matter. It so happens that the "Remembering 9/11" issue of *WORLD* magazine (Sept. 10, 2011) contains an article titled "Islam vs. Liberty" in which author Marvin Olasky asks and answers a question not unrelated to our essay topic: "*Is a rule-obsessed religion that denies original sin and the need for grace compatible with freedom?"* The author shows at some length that most basically it is Islam's non-recognition of original sin that makes it profoundly different from biblical Christianity.[11]

I have often told this story in confirmation classes. After formal Christian schooling throughout elementary, high school, and three college years, I attended my senior year at Mankato State University while also taking classes at Immanuel Lutheran College in Mankato. To my surprise and dismay my sociology instructor took a jab at "those Christian Bible believers who tell children they are sinful from birth, thus instilling an inferiority complex." After class I spoke to him about my believing what the Bible teaches regarding original sin. It got me nowhere, of course, the instructor contending that children become bad or evil from their environmental surroundings, or something to that effect.

If that was the case then, what about now? What is taught today in the progressive, liberal, public educational establishment? The idea that man is a sinner, answerable and accountable to God not only for the sin he himself committed but also for "inherited" sin, is taken as a frontal slap in the face to proud, natural human beings. Man is, we are told, a product of (God-less) evolution. He is the author of his own destiny and determiner of his own fate.

I like to tell another story that is also related to original sin and its effects. While working in a cemetery and doing custodial work in a mausoleum, I engaged a female co-worker in a religious conversation. She was from the Reformed camp, with Billy Graham as one of her favorite preachers. As our discussion came to conversion, and sinners making their "decisions for Christ," I used the very site to make a spiritual point. I asked, "What are the chances that the dust and ashes in the crypts around us are any time soon going to spring to life?" God alone knows what effect, if any, the conversation had on the dear lady.

The scriptural teaching of original sin has been and remains a core principle of our Reformation Lutheran faith and confession before the world and also before and within the religious community. That mankind is dead in trespasses and sins by nature shows that salvation is indeed by grace alone. Man cannot bring himself to faith anymore than a corpse can of itself spring to life. Conversion is all the work of God the Holy Ghost as He works through the Word and the Sacrament of regeneration in Holy Baptism. After becoming new creatures in Christ, being instilled with the Spirit-created new life, hungering and thirsting for God, a believer "cooperates" by feeding his faith on the means of grace, the gospel of Word and through Sacrament, which in turn leads him to live a life of daily repentance before his Savior-God.

Truly, had leveler heads not prevailed in the Flacian controversy, the consequences would have been far-reaching for our scriptural, Lutheran Christian witness—undermining the gospel itself, robbing poor sinners of the comfort which only that gospel can afford.

All mankind fell in Adam's fall, One common sin infects us all; From sire to son the bane descends, And over all the curse impends.
Thro' all man's pow'rs corruption creeps And him in dreadful bondage keeps; In guilt he draws his infant breath And reaps its fruits of woe and death.
From hearts depraved, to evil prone, Flow tho'ts and deeds of sin alone; God's image lost, the darkened soul Nor seeks nor finds its heav'nly goal.
But Christ, the second Adam, came To bear our sin and woe and shame, To be our Life, our Light, our Way, Our only Hope, our only Stay.
As by one man all mankind fell And, born in sin, was doomed to hell,
So by one Man, who took our place, We all received the gift of grace.
We thank Thee, Christ; new life is ours, New light, new hope, new strength, new powers: This grace our every way attend Until we reach our journey's end! (TLH 369)

Appendix I: Table of Controversies

* In a reduced-size format this table is printed at the end.

Appendix II: Historical

* To provide our readers with additional historical background, the excerpts below come from the Introduction to *Formulators of the Formula of Concord,* pages 12-18, with emphasis added.

The Formula of Concord also came into existence at the occasion of a crisis in Christianity. At stake was the Gospel that had found articulation in the theology of Martin Luther, particularly as expressed in the Augsburg Confession of 1530, written by Luther's colleague, companion, and co-worker, Philip Melanchthon, and in Luther's own distillations of his theology, his Large and Small Catechisms of 1529 and his Smalcald Articles of 1537. The crisis was occasioned when, shortly after Luther's death (1546) and the military catastrophe of German Protestantism signaled by the victory of Charles V at Muehlberg (1547), the Augsburg and Leipzig Interims were promulgated as law (1548). These documents represented compromise efforts by Emperor Charles V to settle temporarily the religious controversy between the Roman Catholics and the Evangelicals. Intended as temporary solutions only, it was anticipated that the definitive solution would be effected by the Council of Trent, which had begun its sessions in 1545.

But neither the Interims nor the Council of Trent brought the desired peace. Whereas the latter was too forthright in its condemnation of Lutheran doctrine, the former were too obviously compromise formulations heavily biased in favor of the Roman Catholic position, especially with reference to the celebration of the Mass and its accompanying ceremonial. Melanchthon, apprehensive about the chances of survival for the Evangelical faith, felt himself compelled to compromise evangelical freedom by yielding to Roman Catholic demands in matters of ritual in exchange for a moderately stated Lutheran doctrine of justification. Although he later admitted his error, he was never able to free himself from the stigma which attached to this show of weakness. The ensuing struggle between his followers and those of the hyper-Lutheran Matthias Flacius is usually referred to as the "adiaphoristic controversy," and it remained an issue until the time of the Formula of Concord, especially since it raised the question as to whether the course which had been suggested by the Interims should be specifically condemned in new confessional formulations. It was a crisis in the understanding of the Gospel since it involved the freedom which attached to this Gospel. (Jungkuntz 12-13)

Historians commonly distinguish between three theological parties involved in the disputes finally clarified by the Formula:

1) *The Philippists.* These were the followers of Philip Melanchthon, who thought of their master, with his seemingly more flexible theological positions, as the most reliable and authoritative

interpreter and adapter of Luther for the critical times arising after Luther's death. Most of the doctrines eventually rejected by the Formula of Concord were maintained and defended by this group.

2) *The Gnesio-Lutherans.* So-called because they thought of themselves as those disciples of Luther who followed their master most strictly, they were represented particularly by men like Matthias Flacius (1520-75) and Nicolaus von Amsdorf (1483-1565). They were prepared to oppose the Philippists even at the risk of their own lives, and they made the condemnation of heretics a key issue of the ongoing debate. However, Flacius left himself open to precisely such a condemnation by his assertion that original sin is not an "accident" but the very "substance" of fallen man [Tappert, p. 468, ¶19], and Amsdorf did the same by his teaching that good works are detrimental to salvation [Tappert, p. 477, ¶17].
3) *The Center-Party*. Whereas the other two parties were clearly defined from the outset of the controversies, this Center-Party came into being as a direct result of the entire process of pacification conducted by those loyal Lutherans who could not feel comfortable with either of the above extremes. All of the formulators of the Formula of Concord would fall into this group.

It is now of interest to ask which factors, other than the purely theological, may have contributed to the formation of these three constellations of theologians.

One factor which ought to be kept in mind is the ongoing rivalry that existed between the two Saxon houses—Ernestine Saxony, which held the electorate until 1547, and Albertine Saxony, which succeeded to the electorate after that date. To be in possession of the electoral privilege was no small honor, so it is not surprising that when one house lost the honor to the other, considerable political hostility ensued. Precisely this occurred in this instance as a result of the conniving Duke Maurice, who by his support of Charles V had wrenched the electoral title to himself and the Albertine house. Thereby the region about Wittenberg, known as the "electoral circle," also fell to Albertine Saxony. This meant that Wittenberg University, dominated by Melanchthon, was now under Albertine jurisdiction. Whereas the Philippists adjusted to the change, the Gnesio-Lutherans relocated to the University of Jena, the school Ernestine Saxony substituted for its loss of Wittenberg. So the theological differences continued, but now the flames were also fed by those gathering tinder for the collaborationists on the one hand for the resistance on the other. Similarly Leipzig supported Wittenberg whereas Magdeburg supported Jena. (Jungkuntz 14-15)

Before proceeding directly with an investigation of the lives of Jakob Andreae, Martin Chemnitz, David Chytraeus, and Nikolaus Selnecker, it would be helpful to have before us a brief sketch of those political/ecclesiastical events subsequent to the Peace of Augsburg which signal the progressive stages leading to the eventual publication of the Formula of Concord.

The Council of Trent, 1545-63. Held during intervals extending from 10 years before the Peace of Augsburg to nearly 10 years after, this council played an important role in the revival of Roman Catholicism, and it helped to mobilize the Counter-Reformation. By its anathematization of doctrinal positions enunciated by the Augsburg Confession it tended to move beyond debate certain positions which the Augsburg Confession itself had not expressly condemned. Thus it contributed toward making vulnerable many of the mildly Romanizing formulations of the Philippists.

The Colloquy at Worms, 1557. The alleged purpose of this colloquy was to give expression to Duke Christoph's policy of presenting a united Lutheran front in the face of the Roman Catholic opposition. He favored a renewed subscription to the Augsburg Confession as interpreted by the Apology and a general condemnation of all opposing doctrine. The Gnesio-Lutherans, however, insisted on specific condemnations. The colloquy ended when the cleft between the Gnesio-Lutherans and the Philippists became so manifest that the Roman Catholic representatives refused to deal with such as could not agree as to who indeed were the true adherents of the Augsburg Confession.

The Frankfurt Recess, 1558. Since the Colloquy at Worms had left the Lutherans in a state of disarray, the Lutheran princes determined to bend all their energies toward healing the breach and restoring religious unity within their churches. They met at Frankfurt/Main, in the absence of the

theologians and signed the Frankfurt Recess, in which they again solemnly pledged their adherence to the Augsburg Confession of 1530 and its Apology. In an additional four articles they dealt with the controverted questions but in vague and ambiguous terms reflecting the position of Melanchthon. Although readily accepted in Wuerttemberg, there was strong opposition to the Recess in Ernestine Saxony.

The Weimar Book of Confutation, 1559. The Gnesio-Lutheran opposition to the Frankfurt Recess produced the "Weimar Book of Confutation," which made a special point of refuting and rejecting the errors of the Philippists. This in turn spurred on the latter to produce the *Corpus Misnicum* or *Philippicum*, which canonized certain writings of Melanchthon. The breach now seemed incurable and permanent.

The Convention of Princes at Naumburg, 1561. Duke Christoph again urged a convention of princes as the best means to restore unity to Lutheranism. The request of the Gnesio-Lutherans for a free, general Lutheran synod was rejected, and the princes met alone at Naumburg (30 miles southwest of Leipzig) to renew their subscription to the Augsburg Confession. The original intention was to subscribe the unaltered edition, but Elector Frederick III of the Palatinate (who later became a Calvinist) preferred the altered edition of 1540, and his opinion prevailed except with John Frederick of Ernestine Saxony, who refused to sign and left the diet in anger.

The Heidelberg Catechism, 1563. Written by Kaspar Olevianus, pupil of Calvin, and Zacharias Ursinus, pupil of Melanchthon, this catechism was commissioned by Frederick III, elector and ruler of the Palatinate, who by this time had publicly become a supporter of Reformed theology and had embarked upon a determined effort to de-Lutheranize the Palatinate in every particular. Duke Christoph's attempt at the Maulbronn Colloquy (1564) to regain Elector Frederick for his pan-Protestant front against the Romanists ended in failure. The Palatinate was thus lost to Lutheranism except for the brief period of the reign of Ludwig VI (1576-83). (Jungkuntz 16-18)

Appendix III: Islam and Original Sin

** The following excerpts come from Marvin Olasky's article in the WORLD* magazine issue of September 10, 2011

After informing readers that he taught a comparative religion course at the University of Texas in which he "tried to explain the basic Christian story of Creation, Fall, and Redemption," Olasky states:

> *In a class of 30, at the western edge of the Bible Belt, only a handful knew the biblical belief that we are helpless in our sins and that our only hope lies in God's grace because of Christ's sacrifice. Most students identified Christianity with a set of moralistic rules: Obey them and you're good.*
>
> *Oddly enough, what they saw as Christianity is more like Islam. Muslims do not recognize original sin. They contend that Allah through his prophet Muhammad laid out the rules for moral living, and that we are naturally capable of following all of them.* (70)

And where does this lead, we ask:

> *Islam's non-recognition of original sin, and consequent assumption that we can be sinless, leads Mubasher Ahmed of the Islamic Research Foundation International to conclude that it's possible "to eliminate suffering caused by humans." Muslims believe Allah has set out rules that can lead to a just society: Shariah law. The other alternative, a society of liberty, will bring pain but no gain: Liberty for what, to disobey Allah's rules?* (Olasky 72)

The *WORLD* author extrapolates:

> *The difference between the two religions is profound. Christians emphasize God's grace in changing people like Jacob and Joseph who were liars and braggarts, people like Samson and Paul who relied on their own strength or their own intelligence, people like Gideon and Peter who through God's grace lost their fear and became bold and courageous. These individuals had to become aware of their own transgressions and limitations. They had to be broken, because often we don't realize how much we need God until we have no other alternative.* (Olasky 72)

Olasky then adds a bit more in his attempt to explain:

> *The Bible story is troubling to devout Muslims. Christians read in the Bible honest reporting about twisted, sinful individuals whom God chose not because of their own righteousness but because of His love.* (72)

Aren't such observations hitting the proverbial nail on the head? With his own take Olasky continues on the same page:

> *Since original sin does not exist, why does the Bible tell the stories of so many sinners?*
>
> *What to Christians makes the Bible ring true—its record of how Noah got drunk, Lot committed incest, etc.—is exactly what makes it ring false to Muslims. Muslims believe that Allah picked biblical leaders to carry His messages because of their strong character, which enabled them to obey the rules. In Christianity the last shall be first. In Islam the first shall be first.* (72)

Before reaching his conclusion, the author also writes: *"Without a sense of original sin, Muslims do not grasp Lord Acton's idea that (among humans) power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely"* (Olasky 75).

Endnotes

[1] This essay, like its counterpart printed in the June 2014 issue, was written originally as part of an ongoing Bente's *Historical Introductions* series and presented to the CLC West Central Pastoral Conference held in September of 2011.

[2] Quoted material has been highlighted in italics, with documentation cited per MLA guidelines; see Works Cited below. Underlining has been added by the essayist.

[3] Cf. Appendix II above for further insights into the interwoven political side of things; I find particularly interesting and helpful the listing there given of political and ecclesiastical events subsequent to the Peace of Augsburg.

[4] Philip had just passed on, having died on April 19, 1560.

[5] The source of this statement of Flacius is cited in Bente's "Historical Introductions" as "Luthardt, 213. 216."

[6] Manchaeism was *"a syncretistic philosophy/theology that envisioned two antagonistic powers, the Power of Light and the Power of Darkness, as competing creative forces in the world. It had been rejected by the early Christian church specifically in the words of the first article of the Nicene Creed, 'I believe in one God, the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, and of* all *things visible and invisible'"* (Klug 26).

[7] For specific cases of controversy in the Church of the Lutheran Confession, one can peruse Chapter 17 in David Lau's *Out of Necessity: A History of the Church of the Lutheran Confession*.

[8] This essay is available online at clclutheran.net.

[9] On pages 461-471 of the Reader's Edition the editor's introduction presents the "Controversies" that the Formula of Concord was drafted to settle. The summary of the "The Controversy about Original Sin" can be found on pages 470-471.

[10] Hesshusius published several refutations of Flacius's position in 1570 and 1571.

[11] For more on this point see the excerpts in Appendix III above.

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Book Review

Curtis A. Jahn: *A Lutheran Looks at . . . Catholics*; Northwestern Publishing House, 2014; paperback, 241 pages, 5 preliminary pages.

This informative book continues the Northwestern Publishing House series of volumes that examine the current scene in various denominations from a confessional Lutheran viewpoint. A few others in this series have been reviewed in the *Journal of Theology*.

As one might expect, there are chapters on Vatican II, the papacy, Scripture and tradition, justification, the sacraments, Mary and the saints, and also parish renewal. The opening chapter is an overview of modern Catholicism and the closing chapter deals with a few global trends in Catholicism.

Though outsiders may tend to admire Roman Catholicism for its unity under one authority, the fact is that there is no doctrinal unity among Roman Catholics today. Author Curtis Jahn, an editor at Northwestern Publishing House, demonstrates that "there is considerable doctrinal diversity within the Catholic Church. This diversity ranges from what we might call ultratraditionalism on the one extreme to ultraliberalism on the other, with varying degrees of conservatism and liberal progressivism in between" (p. 5).

The progressive wing seems to be winning the battle with regard to the interpretation of Scripture. At Luther's time and in most of the years since then, the Roman Catholic Church has generally taught that the Bible is the Word of God, even though it has been interpreted by them in a way contrary to its true meaning. But, as Jahn observes: "In the Catholic Church today, very few bishops and theologians, even among the more theologically conservative ones, hold to the full inerrancy of Scripture. Higher-critical methods of Bible interpretation that were once condemned are now openly practiced by nearly all Catholic theologians. Anti-scriptural doctrines such as evolution (including the denial of Adam and Eve as historical persons and as the first parents of the human race) were condemned in the past but now are being taught openly" (p. 69). Of course, Roman Catholics have always depended on the church and its hierarchy to tell them what the Bible means.

In spite of an unwarranted optimism among liberal Lutherans that the controversy between Catholicism and Lutheranism on the doctrine of justification has been resolved, Jahn shows that the teachings of the Council of Trent are still current in the Roman Catholic Church. "The Catholic Church has never rescinded these canons of the Council of Trent that curse and damn Lutherans. What is more, Vatican II, in spite of its nice-sounding ecumenical appeals to Protestants as 'separated brethren,' did not rescind Trent's anathemas. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* reiterates the Catholic doctrine of justification by faith *and* works" (p. 89). Even the teachings on purgatory and indulgences, which were matters of fierce debate in the sixteenth century, are still current, although ignored or downplayed by many.

Worst of all, however, it appears that modern Catholics are not taught to put their trust in Jesus alone for salvation. Peter Kreeft, a Catholic college professor, is quoted as saying: "Well over 90% of students I have polled who have had 12 years of catechism classes, even Catholic high schools, say they

expect to go to Heaven because they tried, or did their best, or had compassionate feelings to everyone, or were sincere. They hardly ever mention Jesus. Asked why they hope to be saved, they mention almost anything except the Savior" (p. 109). Unfortunately, Lutherans do not fare much better in such polls. One wonders how many so-called Christians in the world are really believers in Jesus Christ. We thank our God that the true Gospel is still to be found in the *Agnus Dei of the ancient liturgy*.

The chapter I found most enlightening was the chapter on Mary and the saints. Jahn maintains that "the cult of the Virgin has grown dramatically in the 19th and 20th centuries. A major part of this growth has been the rise in the number of supposed apparitions of Mary. . . . Some of the more prominent sites of Marian apparitions are Guadalupe, Mexico (1530); Lourdes, France (1858); and Fatima, Portugal (1917)" (p. 186). The popes, of course, have used their so-called infallible authority to declare two new doctrines concerning Mary: her immaculate conception (1854) and her bodily assumption into heaven (1950). Now there is a push among many to have Mary declared to be the co-redemptrix of the human race, which would practically make her equal with God.

To his credit Jahn is straightforward in maintaining the confessional Lutheran doctrine that the papacy is the Antichrist foretold in 2 Thessalonians 2: "When we observe the development and claims of the institution of the papacy. . . , we see all the details of Paul's prophecy fulfilled in the Roman papacy. . . . We must conclude that only one institution in history fits all of the scriptural marks of the Antichrist: the Roman papacy. . . (pp. 50-51). To identify "the papacy as the Antichrist was not just a private, personal opinion of Martin Luther. It is the official teaching of the Lutheran church, clearly set forth in its official public confessions in the *Book of Concord* of 1580. It might also be mentioned that all the Protestant reformers of the 16th century, including non-Lutherans, identified the papacy as the Antichrist" (p. 53).

In some of the other books in the Northwestern series the authors have visited services of the various groups and listened to some of the sermons and presentations. We have no report of such visitations by the author of this book. No doubt, such information would have been enlightening. But certainly there is enough material in this book for anyone to get a good grasp of what is going on in the Roman Catholic Church today. This reviewer recommends its purchase by pastors and also for church libraries.

David Lau

Name of Controvery	Approximate Date	Historical Introduction page	Topic in Dispute	Chief Errorists	Opponents of the Error
1. Adiaphoristic	1548-1555	107	Church Rites	Wittenburg Interimists	Flacius, Gallus, Wigand
2. Majoristic	1557-1562	112	Good Works	Melanchthon, Major, Menius	Cordatus, Amsdorf, Flacius
3. Synergistic	1555-1560	124	Free Will	Melanchthon, Pfeffinger, Strigel	Sola gratia (Luther), Flacius, Amsdorf, Hesshusius, Wigand
4. Flacian	1560-1575	144	Original Sin	Flacius	Moerlin, Chemnitz, Hesshusius, Wigand
5. Osiandric - Stancarian	1549-1566	152	Righteousness of Faith	Osiander, Stancarus	Moerlin, Melanchthon, Flacius, Amsdorf, Wigand

6. Antinomistic	1527-1556	161	Law & Gospel, 3rd Use of Law	Agricola, Philippists, Poach, Otto	Luther, Melancthon, Flacius, Amsdorf, Wigand
7. Crypto-Calvinistic	1560-1574	172	Holy Supper, Person of Christ	Melanchthon, Bucer, Beza Oecolampadius, Calvin	Westphal, Brenz, Chemnitz, Hesshusius, Andreae
8. Hamburg	Ca. 1544	192	Christ's Descent to hell	Aepinus	Luther
9. Strassburg		195	Eternal Election	Calvin, Melanchthon, Zanchi, et alii	Luther, Marbach, Chemnitz

** Note to readers of the *Journal*: Indexes for past articles and reviews, including those in Volume 54 (2014 issues), are posted at the end of: http://clclutheran.org/library/jt_arch.html